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The University of Dayton

News Release

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Contact: Pam Huber

FAMILY CONSTITUTIONS GOVERN ACTIONS AND INTERACTIONS

DAYTON, Ohio — Setting guidelines for family life can be a congenial and friendly process, especially if family members take a conscious look at the “constitution” that governs their actions, says Mark A. Fine, professor of psychology at the University of Dayton and co-author of *Understanding and Helping Families: A Cognitive Approach*.

Co-author of the book, recently published by Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates Inc., is Andrew Schwebel, professor of psychology at The Ohio State University.

A family’s constitution will govern actions as diverse as the way the toilet paper unwinds from the roll, how often to say “I love you” and how many children the couple wants, Fine says. Constitutions are generally “unwritten and undiscussed,” he says, and that’s because as long as they work, they don’t draw notice.

The constitution begins on the first date, when the couple decides who drives, who pays and who carries the conversation. Decisions don’t have to be verbal or even conscious, Fine says. But as the relationship progresses, the expectations that each person brings from his or her own family help to shape the emerging set of guidelines. To be successful, they each need to compromise and tolerate what their partner can’t or won’t change. Rules are frequently changed or added to cope with changing or new situations.

“Most issues are not controversial enough to cause big rifts, but some are,” Fine says.

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Establishing bedtimes and choosing the stations to set on the car radio can cause minor fusses, while conflicts over acceptable credit balances and career demands can be more serious, he says.

It's when the constitution no longer works that families should take notice and use a conscious decision-making process to amend the rules, Fine says. "When one or both of the partners or the children notice that it's not working, then it's not working. Family meetings, with husband and wife and kids, can help clarify the problem," he says, noting that some decisions are better left in the hands of the parents and that kids aren't always involved. But when it's appropriate, everyone should have a chance to weigh the pros and cons of alternative rules that are suggested in a family meeting. They can all have a say in choosing the solution, then implementing it and evaluating it after a trial period, he says.

The process uses a "cognitive approach that can help us understand how families function, how family problems can arise and how these problems can be resolved," Fine says.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For media interviews, call **Mark Fine** at (513) 229-2165.